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The influence of the home environment on children's learning has long been recognized as significant. While many schools strive to involve families, others complain about parent apathy. Mavrogenes (1990) points out that teachers and principals need to question their assumption that low-income parents do not care about their children's education. It is likely that many parents are willing to help, but have few ideas about how to provide help, or have negative memories of school themselves. Parents' insecurity in the school setting may indeed be read as parental apathy (Greenberg, 1989; Moles, 1982).

Schools are generally staffed by middle-class teachers who "reflect middle-class, culturally defined views of what literacy is and how it is best developed" (Cairney and Munsie, 1995,). Particular linguistic styles, curricula, and authority patterns may send messages to diverse cultures about appropriate learning environments and thus alienate various parents (Bourdieu and Passerson, 1977). Partnership programs that seek to educate and cooperate without alienating families are indeed needed for all children. This paper presents some exemplary programs and guiding principles which teachers can share with parents to promote their children's literacy.

## Parents as teachers

Parents as teachers (PAT) is a program that supports the home-school connection. "Begun in Missouri and replicated in 36 other states and Australia, the Parents as Teachers program is based on the philosophy that parents are a child's first and most influential teachers, and that the school's role in the early years is to assist families in giving their children a solid educational foundation" (Winter and Rouse, 1990).

Parents as Teachers programs involve home visits, information on developmental ways to enhance learning, group meetings for sharing and support, and screening for detection of possible developmental delays. Parents involved in this program are often given information without being lectured, or as one parents put it, "This program doesn't tell parents what they are doing wrong, but rather offers suggestions for improvement." This program focuses on what parents can do to enhance children's literacy. "Without acknowledging the learning environment of the home and developing strategies to build on family strengths, we cannot hope to make a difference in children's literacy" (Winter and Rouse, 1990).

Winter and Rouse (1990) described the benefits of Missouri Parents as Teachers program. Children in the pilot study were, at age three, significantly more advanced than comparison group children in language, social development, problem solving, and other cognitive abilities. School districts were also viewed more positively by project parents than by those in comparison groups.

## Applying the principles of parents as teachers

There is much to be learned from the structure of the Parents as Teachers program. An effort is made to get to know the family and to support what the parents are already

doing. Information is given in a non-threatening manner, and appropriate strategies are modeled. Parents are seen as partners in the process of education, not entities to be blamed for why kids aren't learning.

As children come to school, these programs can be emulated in classroom activities. One way to do this is to have a workshop session for parents on ways in which they can enhance their children's literacy learning. Mavrogenes (1990) suggested that parents be trained or helped in a workshop manner, "If all these elements are present in a training workshop for parents — a warm and accepting attitude, presentation of rationale, modeling, practice, and feedback — the outcomes should be more lasting than a mere list of suggestions on yet another ditto sent home." (Mavrogenes, 1990).

Another way to involve parents is to provide materials for reading and writing activities at home. Shockley (1993) described a literacy project which involved parents in reading the books their first graders had selected and writing about these books in home response journals. This project enhanced parents' involvement in their children's literacy learning and, as Shockley writes, "I saw children and parents building relationships around books" (Shockley, 1993).

Whatever the parental involvement program might be, the following elements are essential. Teachers must first be supportive of what parents are already doing to enhance learning. Information can then be shared that will help parents help their children. This information should be shared ideally by modeling it with parents and children. In this way, parents can see the process in action. Expensive materials are not necessary for enhancing literacy. Simply demonstrating how to read a book to a child and encouraging discussion of the book is an important lesson in literacy learning. "Most

things that parents can do to encourage reading and writing involve time, attention, and sensitivity rather than money" (Mavrogenes, 1990). Moreover, a rationale should always be provided and there should be some mechanism set up for parents to voice questions and concerns and to receive feedback from the teacher.

## Conclusion: Ways to enhance literacy with your child

If we truly wish to enhance parental involvement in schools, we also need to train teachers in the art of working with parents. Chavkin and Williams (1988) reported that of 575 teacher educators surveyed, only 37% reported having as much as one class period on parent-teacher relations. If teachers are to work more closely with parents, then teacher education programs must focus more on building this important relationship as well.

In the conclusion are ten simple reading-writing activities that could be shared with parents at an open-house or workshop on literacy learning. Modeling these processes with the parents is the best way to make it memorable and will help parents to see possibilities.

1. Take lots of photographs and make your own books by labeling or writing about the pictures taken and pasting them in a notebook or pieces of paper stapled together. For instance, use the picture book *All I Am* (Roe, 1990) as a model and then write your own books based upon your child's interests. A child pictured with siblings could write "I am a sister" or a picture of a pet could be labeled "I am a pet owner." Encourage children to write the words themselves as best they can.

2. Make puppets and retell a familiar fairy tale or favorite story. Paper bags and paper plates make wonderful, inexpensive puppets.

3. Make a trip to the library a part of your weekly routine. Encourage children to check out books, magazines, poetry anthologies, and other materials as you do the same.

4. Encourage children to read the book after watching the video. For instance, the popular films, "Matilda" and "James and the Giant Peach" are still available as books written by Roald Dahl. Videos of Ramona books (by Beverly Cleary) are also of high quality and available at most libraries. Make a game of finding the book title from the closing credits of a video or movie and then find the book at your library. As you read the book with your children, talk about similarities and differences between the book and the video.

5. A good general procedure to follow while reading aloud: Show the book's cover. Read the title, author, and illustrator. Have children make predictions about what the book might be about. Talk about the author and illustrator. Have children try to remember if they have read other books by this author or illustrator. As you read the book, stop periodically and have children guess what might happen next. Ask why. Offer your own predictions and reasons for making those predictions.

6. Keep a daily calendar or journal where you and your child write down your favorite part of the day or what you learned that day.

7. Read several books by the same author and talk about the author/illustrator's style. Good choices for young children are: Eve Bunting, Eric Carle, Nancy Carlson, Donald

Crews, Tomie dePaola, Kevin Henkes, Steven Kellogg, and Cynthia Rylant.

8. No matter what the age of your child, read aloud to them daily. Choose nonfiction as well as fiction. If you are really pressed for time, read a poem from a poetry anthology.

9. Keep a journal and write your responses to the book in the journal. Or draw pictures in response to the journal. Some good prompts (Kelly, 1990) to start this journal: a) What did you notice about this book?; b) How did it make you feel and why?; c) What did it remind you of?

10. Be a role model of a lifelong reader yourself Let your child see you reading a variety of materials, including the newspaper, cookbooks, telephone books, magazines, books, maps, etc. Provide a variety of these reading materials for your child as well.

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